

Baltasar Gracián and the Ethics of the Renaissance

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The Renaissance court was a unique world and comprised peculiar and unique characters. According to Norbert Elias in his work *Die Höfische Gesellschaft* (1986: 19), it may be defined objectively and literally as the house where the King, his family and an immense set of attendants lived. This definition refers to Louis XIV's French court, therefore to a reality posterior to the Elizabethan age, with a much more complex and elaborate structure. But Elizabeth's court, and afterwards James I's, contained potentially the elements that would assume an extreme form at the time of the *roi soleil*.

Beyond this literal characterisation, what really matters, however, is something deeper. According to Gary Waller (1986: 14): "The court was more than merely the seat of government, or wherever the monarch happened to be".

The Renaissance court was not limited to the palace inhabited by that immense set, to the place where people physically were. It corresponded to the emergence of a new spirit, of a restricted and particular society where only a few naturally fitted in and were accepted. The way the courtiers behaved, the people who they had to deal with proved to be indeed crucial.

Everything was then based upon different social relationships which were created and developed, resulting from new official jobs and places of duty. This did not happen solely in England and has to be understood within a European context, according to what took place on the Continent. The Renaissance courts were the consequence of many social, economic, institutional and cultural changes, in the wake of the discovery of new worlds, the necessity of new diplomatic missions in foreign nations and, above all, to the revolution brought about by Humanism.

Within this context, the ethics inherent to the courtly society assumed a fundamental relevance. Its most vivid and symptomatic formulation is precisely contained in the works by two authors of the Continent: Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1502; 1528) and Baltasar Gracián's *El héroe* (1637), *El discreto* (1646) and *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* (1647). Machiavelli's *Il Principe*, the composite *Mirror for Magistrates* and Elyot's *The Book Named the Governour*, among others, are surely pertinent under a certain perspective but to approach them here would lead us away from the present problematic.

As we know, the English Renaissance happened after the Italian one, as did the Spanish *siglo de oro* in relation to the English Renaissance. Therefore, the way how these realities interact has to be taken into account.

There is a fundamental difference between Castiglione and Gracián. The first lived and wrote during the golden period of the Italian *quattrocento* that would directly influence Elizabethan England. His presuppositions met, in place and time, the courtier to whom they were directed: *Il Cortegiano* revived, so to speak, with Sir Thomas Hoby's translation in 1561, as well as with the Elizabethan courtly world. The work was then extrapolated into this world, meeting a new space able to assimilate it and follow its proposals.

Gracián's texts could not obviously be projected into the English 16th century or influence it. *El héroe* would be translated by Skeffington just in 1652 (*The Hero*). But if with *Il Cortegiano* we do understand many features that characterise the Elizabethan courtly society, with Gracián's works we do perceive the evolutionary trait of that same society.

In *Il Cortegiano*, the Elizabethans sought to find the theoretical essence capable of ruling and making them come nearer to the courtly ideal; when we read the theses contained in the three Spanish works we realise that the golden age had faded out: the courtly world that may be apprehended reveals a negative, corrupt reality. Gracián keeps establishing a chain with the previous ethics, before the decline, because an ideal of behaviour, opposite to the degraded atmosphere of the court, should always be maintained. That is why we eventually find in Gracián a higher normative tonality than in Castiglione. The English 16th century seems to be situated precisely between both authors' theses. It constituted a golden age in many aspects but it was gradually exhausted; it contains a lot of Castiglione but it is directed towards Gracián.

To understand this world implies understanding the peculiar figure of the courtier. Going back to Norbert Elias, the courts of the great princes harboured hundreds, sometimes thousands of attendants with varied functions and duties. The necessity of imposing themselves and maintaining the positions within this social web shaped their very particular personalities and actions. Once again Elias image seems exaggerated to portray the Elizabethan court. But, as we have seen, the world of Elizabeth was an embryo of later times: it lay halfway between the house of the Italian prince, where it found its model, and the complex, baroque, absolutist courts.

The knights of the new times, who moved in this microcosm and made it move, were the leading elements. To be a courtier meant something more than the obvious literal sense seems to include. It meant a condition that implied the knowledge of how to be and how to act. Renaissance and medieval values blended into each other grew inseparable, as it is expressed in *Il Cortegiano*: the multifaceted image presupposes the innate qualities –nobility of spirit and birth–, together with the acquired ones, amalgamated in a complete education. The main aim is an insertion into the world, a fundamental know-how to perform with skill under every circumstance. In this way, the medieval sense of service and loyalty, as well as the practice of martial arts, are complemented with the study of a wide range of disciplines within the new humanistic *curriculum*.

Gracián's three works constitute a whole, one complementing the other, and are equally directed to the courtier. They are guided by two primordial principles: "el saber" and "el saber vivir". The deepest and most meaningful element of Gracián's theses is probably contained in *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* (1984: 147): "Hay mucho que saber, y es poco el vivir y no se vive si no se sabe". The speech, besides being normative, is characterised by a strong advisory nature.

In Castiglione we find the description of a true courtier and how he should improve his innate qualities, together with the rules and principles to be followed and adopted, in order to reach the ideal shape.

In Gracián we may perceive a path towards a growing interiority, in the sense that the intellectual qualities are the ones to be developed and improved. In fact, after *El héroe*, *El discreto* and *Oráculo...* he wrote *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (1648). There is a clear progression, an evolution, along the four texts. *El héroe* may be seen as the portrait of the ideal courtier; *El discreto* shows the courtier inserted

in the ambivalent world of opportunities and dangers; *Oráculo...* is the guide, full of advice and principles to avoid the loss of position, privilege and, above all, integrity; *Agudeza...* abandons the mundane setting and constitutes a sort of a treaty on culture and the art to approach it. It is wholly dedicated to the capacity of the mind, implying a complete process of education.

The most subtle work is certainly *El discreto*. The metaphor “discreto” encloses, right from the beginning, a powerful meaning: as the text presents the courtier’s attributes, no longer designated as hero, it simultaneously adverts to all the dangers summarised in *Oráculo...*

Gracián establishes three periods in the complete educational process of his “discreto” (1984: 132; 134; 135): 1) “el aprender... [los] libros, pasto del alma, delicias del espíritu”; 2) “[el] peregrinar (...) quien no ve las cosas no goza enteramente de ellas”; 3) “[el] meditar lo mucho que había leído y lo más que había visto”.

“[E]l aprender” includes the study of foreign languages, ancient and vernacular, of History, Poetry (Literature), Philosophy, Cosmography (1984: 133), Astrology, as well as of the Bible (1984: 134), with the reference to several authors: Horace, Plato, Plutarch, etc. (1984: 133). “[E]l peregrinar” corresponds to the famous ‘Grand Tour’ that so many Elizabethan nobles made: the travels around Europe, to France, England, Germany, “Moscovia” and Italy (1984: 134), visiting and living temporarily “en las cortes de los mayores príncipes”, learning with “los primeros y mayores hombres del mundo, eminentes, ya en letras, ya en valor, ya en las artes” (1984: 135). Gracián gives the primacy to the phase of “el meditar” because “Él [el discreto] pondera, juzga, discurre, infiere y va sacando quintas esencias de verdades” (1984: 135).

With the courtly world falling apart (and the discourse is always, ironically, carried out in the past), the prescribed virtues and educational contents may prevent the personal decline and lead to the art of living which may overcome adversity.

The common line between Castiglione and Gracián lies in this shared intent to portray the profile of someone who, inserted in a complex universe, should perform a series of functions and relations, always acting with rectitude and exemplary conduct. Both authors’ theses, regarding the ideal courtier, together with the characteristics of the Elizabethan knight point out to figures who should act naturally, with excellence, in all walks of life –at war and at the palace, as diplomats and as poets. Such conception implies a polymorphism with all the integrated facets coinciding into a same level of importance, and directed to a specific association of elements.

The image and behaviour of the perfect Renaissance knight must also be seen according to a certain perspective that may turn out to be negative because they depend upon the game of interests and palace intrigues. Many of the so-called perfect courtiers had indeed a discourteous conduct, seriously harming others out of personal ambition. In *Oráculo...* Gracián mentions aspects that are related to this ambivalent atmosphere and, as the title indicates –*Arte de prudencia*– emphasise the need of knowing how to move and act with prudence:

- 84. Saber usar de los enemigos. (1984: 169)
- 86. Prevenir las malas voces. (1984: 170)
- 97. Conseguir e conservar la reputación. (1984: 172)
- 109. No ser acriminador. (1984: 176)
- 111. Tener amigos. Es el segundo ser. (1984: 177)
- 114. Nunca competir. (1984: 177)
- 119. No hacerse de mal querer. (1984: 179)
- 165. Hacer buena guerra.. (1984: 193)

Gracián's advice and warnings are very numerous but they may certainly be summarised in the following one: "118. Cobrar fama de cortés: (...) Es la cortesía la principal parte de la cultura (...) así como la descortesía, el desprecio y enfado universal" (1984: 178).

As it was already mentioned, the Elizabethan world, exhibiting all the characteristics of the Renaissance court prescribed by Castiglione, shows negative signs that meet what later and in another place –17th-century Spain– Gracián would outline.

Such ambivalence is fundamental to the perspective of many factors related to Elizabeth, as well as to some of her courtiers who, being also poets, expressed in lines the feelings of frustration and disappointment. Everything turned out to be hopelessly ephemeral, because of the competitiveness in a microcosm where intrigue thrived: one day you were the Queen's favourite, the day after you were nothing, banished to far-away posts. Being absent from court, even in official duty, meant almost always the loss of position, privilege and opportunity.

During the last years of Elizabeth's reign, a sense of nostalgia grew stronger and stronger. The literary practice was also a kind of way to overcome the frustration and express that same sense of nostalgia, by cultivating theoretically the lost ideals of a brief golden age. For this reason, Gracián's works appear to be extremely valuable when we approach the English 16th century. He managed to summarise, also with a deep sense of nostalgia, the course that the Elizabethans, sometimes very painfully, had to endure because, then, as now, "hay mucho que saber, y es poco el vivir y no se vive si no se sabe" (1984: 147).

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